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Sweden

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Introduction

Sweden, a land at the crossroads of tradition and modernity, has long fascinated visitors and scholars alike. With its deep forests, crystalline lakes, and a rugged coastline dotted with thousands of islands, Sweden is a country where nature and civilization thrive side by side. Located on the Scandinavian Peninsula in Northern Europe, Sweden is the largest country in the Nordic region, sharing borders with Norway and Finland and an extended coastline along the Baltic Sea. Yet this vast and sparsely populated country is far more than just its famous landscapes—it is a nation shaped by centuries of history, innovation, and global engagement.

From the legendary raids of the Vikings who journeyed to faraway lands, to the consolidation of the Swedish crown and the rise of a great empire, Sweden's past is one of turbulence and transformation. Over the centuries, Sweden shifted from feudal monarchy to a modern parliamentary democracy, navigating periods of war, peace, union, and neutrality. Its history is intricately linked with religion—first Norse paganism, then Christianity, and eventually the Lutheran Reformation—which has left enduring marks on its culture and identity.

Today, Sweden stands out as a beacon of social welfare, equality, and progressive values. The Swedish model, with its unique blend of high-tech capitalism and comprehensive social benefits, has drawn both praise and debate across the world. The nation's strong commitment to sustainability, education, and healthcare, as well as its vibrant culture of innovation, has made it a model for many. Urban life in cities like Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö merges seamlessly with accessible green spaces and a quality of life that places a premium on balance and fulfillment.

But Sweden is not static. Over the last century, waves of immigration have transformed its society, making it one of the most multicultural countries in the region. The influx of new ideas, languages, and customs has both enriched the nation's culture and challenged its sense of national identity. As it enters a new era, Sweden faces important questions about integration, economic resilience, and its role on the world stage.

This book, *Sweden: Portrait of a Country*, explores the many dimensions of Swedish life, past and present. Through a journey across history, society, politics, landscape, and everyday experiences, it offers an in-depth look at what gives Sweden its unique character. Whether you are a traveler, a student, or simply curious about this remarkable country, you will find an engaging portrait that reveals both the familiar and the unexpected aspects of Swedish life.

Welcome to Sweden—where tradition meets innovation, and the story of a nation continues to unfold.

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CHAPTER ONE: Geography and Landscapes of Sweden

Sweden, the largest of the Nordic countries, stretches across a significant portion of the Scandinavian Peninsula in Northern Europe. It's a country of remarkable geographical diversity, extending roughly 1,600 kilometers (1,000 miles) from its southern tip to its northern reaches, and approximately 500 kilometers (310 miles) from east to west. This elongated shape is a key factor in the variations seen in its landscapes and climates. To its west, Sweden shares a long land border with Norway, characterized by a mountainous spine. To the east, Finland lies across another land border, while its extensive coastline runs along the Baltic Sea and the Gulf of Bothnia. Maritime borders connect Sweden to several nations, including Denmark, Germany, Poland, Russia, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, highlighting its position as a central Baltic Sea nation. The Öresund Bridge, a feat of modern engineering, physically links Sweden with Denmark in the southwest, further strengthening regional ties.

The sheer size of Sweden, approximately 450,295 square kilometers (173,860 square miles), makes it the fifth-largest country in Europe. Yet, despite its vastness, a significant portion, around 97%, remains uninhabited, allowing nature to flourish. This leads to a landscape that transitions dramatically from high mountains in the west to flat or gently rolling lowlands towards the east. The land generally slopes eastward, guiding numerous rivers towards the Baltic Sea.

The country can be broadly divided into three main geographical regions, each with its distinct character. The vast northern region, known as Norrland, covers about three-fifths of the country's total land area. This expansive territory features an undulating surface of rounded hills, mountains, and large lakes, interwoven with extensive river valleys. Norrland is a land of dramatic wilderness, known for its extensive forests and majestic peaks. Here, one finds Kebnekaise, Sweden's highest mountain. This impressive peak, part of the Scandinavian mountain range, stands at approximately 2,111 meters (6,926 feet). It actually has two main peaks: a glaciated southern peak and an ice-free northern peak, with the height of the southern peak fluctuating due to glacier melt. The surroundings of Kebnekaise are a protected wilderness, offering popular hiking and cross-country skiing destinations.

Moving southward, Central Sweden, or Svealand, presents a more varied and less rugged landscape. This region is often considered the traditional heartland of Sweden due to its historical significance in terms of population and agricultural resources. It features a mix of undulating plains, dark forests, and numerous lakes. Among these, the four largest lakes in Sweden are found: Vänern, Vättern, Mälaren, and Hjälmaren.

Lake Vänern, the largest in Sweden and the third largest in Europe, is a particularly significant geographical feature, boasting Europe's largest freshwater archipelago with over 22,000 islands, rocks, and skerries. The Klar River, one of Scandinavia's longest, flows into Lake Vänern, further contributing to the region's aquatic character. The central lowlands are characterized by fertile soils, making them well-suited for agriculture, a stark contrast to the more heavily forested and till-covered lands to the north and south.

Southern Sweden, known as Götaland, offers an exceptionally varied environment, ranging from fertile plains to hilly terrain. This is the most agriculturally productive part of the country, particularly in the flatlands of its southwestern and western parts, and around Kristianstad, where the best agricultural soil in Sweden is found. These productive plains are more akin to agricultural landscapes found in more southerly European countries. While the north is dominated by coniferous trees, southern Sweden showcases a greater abundance of broadleaf forests and flourishing agricultural fields. Approximately 65% of Sweden's total land area is covered with forests, with roughly 75% of the standing tree volume in southern Sweden consisting of spruce and pine due to forest management practices.

Sweden's extensive coastline, stretching over 3,200 kilometers (2,000 miles), is a defining feature of its geography. Along this rocky edge, hundreds of small islands create a unique "skärgård" or archipelago landscape. These island clusters are particularly prominent around Stockholm on the east coast and Gothenburg on the west coast. The Stockholm Archipelago, for instance, is the largest in Sweden, comprising around 30,000 islands, islets, and skerries that extend into the Baltic Sea. This sprawling natural wonder offers a diverse blend of rugged nature, tranquil coves, and rocky cliffs. Similarly, the Gothenburg Archipelago, located off Sweden's west coast, features over 20 inhabited islands and numerous smaller landforms, known for their beautiful beaches and rugged coastal scenery. Further offshore in the Baltic Sea, the large, relatively flat islands of Öland and Gotland stand out. Öland, the second-largest Swedish island, is connected to the mainland by a bridge and is characterized by limestone and sand ridges, with agriculture being significant along its narrow coastland. Gotland, Sweden's largest island, also features a low coastline with wide bays and an undulating interior plateau of limestone.

Despite its high northern latitude, Sweden generally enjoys a temperate climate, a pleasant surprise largely attributed to the influence of the Gulf Stream. This warm Atlantic ocean current brings milder winters than typically found in other countries at similar latitudes, such as parts of Canada or Russia. However, due to its significant north-to-south extension, the climate varies considerably across the country.

Southern Sweden experiences a temperate oceanic climate, characterized by mild winters where temperatures often stay above freezing, and pleasantly warm summers. Rainfall is relatively high throughout the year in this region, contributing to its lush

vegetation and fertile agricultural lands. Central Sweden presents a blend of oceanic and continental influences. Winters here are shorter and colder than in the south, but summers are still warm and sunny, making it a popular region for outdoor activities.

As one ventures northward, into Norrland, the climate becomes progressively harsher. Northern Sweden lies within the Arctic and subarctic zones, experiencing long, severe winters with temperatures that can drop significantly below freezing, sometimes as low as -30 to -40 degrees Celsius (-22 to -40 degrees Fahrenheit). The Gulf of Bothnia, for instance, is typically covered in sea ice from November to May. Summers in the north are short but can be surprisingly warm, with temperatures occasionally exceeding 20 degrees Celsius (68 degrees Fahrenheit) in July.

A striking characteristic of Sweden's high latitude is the dramatic variation in daylight hours throughout the year. North of the Arctic Circle, the sun does not set for several weeks during the summer months, a phenomenon known as the Midnight Sun. Conversely, during the winter, some northern areas experience months with minimal or no daylight, a period of continuous twilight or darkness. Even as far south as Stockholm, summer nights have only a few hours of semi-darkness, while mid-December brings only about 5.5 hours of daylight. These profound differences in light and temperature not only shape the natural environment but also deeply influence the rhythm of daily life and culture across Sweden.

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